

The Washington Times
July 14, 2005

Lessons on CAFTA

Last-minute concessions from the White House to the sugar lobby picked up several votes, helping to shepherd the Central American Free Trade Agreement through the Senate on June 30 by a margin of 54-45. The House vote, which will not be held until the latter part of July, promises to be closer.

The Senate's narrow approval of CAFTA represents the fifth major free-trade bill to pass the upper chamber of Congress since Bill Clinton entered the White House. The previous landmark trade bills passed by the Senate include the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994, the approval of permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) with China in 2000 and granting the president trade-promotion authority, formerly known as fast-track, in 2002.

To his credit, Mr. Clinton repeatedly spent political capital promoting the free-trade agenda. Throughout his presidency, Mr. Clinton enthusiastically embraced that agenda, despite the fact that many in the Democratic Party had become increasingly protectionist, especially in the House.

Regrettably, the recent CAFTA vote represented a major step toward protectionism within the Senate Democratic Caucus, particularly among those who aspire to become president. Only 23 percent of Senate Democrats (10 of 43) voted for CAFTA. That compares unfavorably to the 41 percent of Democrats (20 of 49) who supported giving President Bush trade-promotion authority, which he used to negotiate CAFTA; the 84 percent (37 of 44) who voted for PNTR with China; the 76 percent (41 of 54) who voted to create the WTO; and the 49 percent (27 of 55) who supported NAFTA.

None of the Senate Democrats who are frequently mentioned as presidential candidates voted for CAFTA. Joe Biden, who supported NAFTA, the WTO and PNTR with China, voted against CAFTA. Longtime, self-styled internationalist John Kerry, who voted for NAFTA, the WTO, PNTR with China and trade-promotion authority, suddenly reversed course and opposed CAFTA. Evan Bayh, who entered the Senate after the NAFTA and WTO votes, supported PNTR and trade-promotion authority but voted against CAFTA. Hillary Clinton, who has been brandishing her seat on the Senate Armed Services Committee as prima facie evidence of her internationalism and national-security credentials, voted against CAFTA and against granting Mr. Bush trade-promotion authority, which Mr. Clinton desperately wanted (and deserved to have) after it had expired in 1994.

Twelve Republicans voted against CAFTA. The last-minute sugar concessions included efforts by the government to encourage the use of sugar to produce ethanol and a proposal to delay CAFTA-approved sugar imports from entering the U.S. market for two years. Seven of the Republicans came from sugar-producing states (David Vitter, Louisiana; John Thune, South Dakota; Conrad Burns, Montana; Craig Thomas and Mike Enzi, Wyoming; Larry Craig and Mike Crapo, Idaho). Another was ... Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, who voted for NAFTA, the WTO and trade-promotion authority.